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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BAGHDAD 000537

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SUBJECT: IRAQIS REACT TO PRESIDENT OBAMA'S SPEECH: MOST WELCOME TROOP WITHDRAWAL MESSAGE, SOME EXPRESS CONCERNS OVER UNRESOLVED POLITICAL ISSUES

Classified By: Deputy Polcouns John G. Fox, per 1.4 b/d.

¶11. (U) SUMMARY: Iraqi leaders and citizens largely welcomed President Obama's February 27, 2009, speech announcing U.S. plans to begin the drawdown of American combat units from the country in line with the Security Agreement. Most said they favored the continuation of a strong American partnership even as troops steadily left the country. The focus on U.S. support for non-sectarian Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) drew particular praise, most prominently among minority Sunnis. Some Iraqis cautioned that outstanding political issues (for example, Kirkuk's status, oil law, disputed territories, etc.) -- alongside open Arab-Kurd tension -- would require sustained U.S. attention. Overall, Iraqis seem ready, although a bit apprehensive at the same time, for a new chapter in Iraqi-U.S. relations to begin. END SUMMARY.

MOST IRAQIS ROUNDLY WELCOME MESSAGE

¶12. (U) Leaders and residents across Iraq expressed strong support for the President's announcement that U.S. troops would begin to drawdown in the country. Positive reactions encompassed all regions. In Hillah, a senior Da'wa provincial leader said the plan showed that both the GoI and new American administration were in full agreement about the path forward. A Sadrists Provincial Council member signaled his agreement in the same meeting with PRT Babil representatives.

¶13. (U) In Anbar, two local party officials expressed overall support for the President's message, but with one urging that U.S. forces should remain in Iraq "for at least another five years" in order to train and support a non-sectarian ISF, as well as to build up the Iraqi air force due to "regional threats." (Note: Anbar-based Sunni Arabs have been among the most vocal about the need for a more long-term U.S. troop presence, given their often-stated concerns about perceived Iranian influence and suspicions toward a Shia-dominated government. The mayor of Ramadi, for example, has regularly told the PRT in Anbar that U.S. forces should "not leave Iraq any time soon." Interestingly and notably, PM Maliki recently described Anbar to the charge and General Odierno as a "hot spot" -- implying the western province should be among the last places from which U.S. troops depart. End note.)

¶14. (U) In Salah ad Din, local contacts (including the PC chairman) have regularly commented that it is key to have a target date for the withdrawal of U.S. forces, which would

help undercut accusations that cooperation with the U.S. amounted to "treasonous" activity.

¶15. (U) In Wasit, Al Kut residents expressed general support for the President's announcement. Some residents, however, inquired whether U.S. troops would remain in Iraq should problems require American military intervention. Sadrists have openly questioned the need to keep up to 50,000 troops in Iraq. Some have cited suspicions regarding U.S. motivations given the high number of the planned residual presence.

SOME FLAG UNRESOLVED POLITICAL ISSUES,
ESPECIALLY IN THE NORTH
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¶15. (U) In northern Iraq, reactions have been (unsurprisingly) more mixed. The PC Chairman in Kirkuk cautioned that moving too quickly to withdraw troops would be a "mistake" and "spoil" the work so far done by the U.S. in Iraq. He said Iraqis perceived the U.S. to be the only effective counter-balance to the Shia-led government; once U.S. troops leave, civil war might erupt as Kurds sought to protect themselves. The chairman added that the U.S. continued to be viewed as the "ultimate authority" in Iraq and that Kurdish leaders remained unsure about how they would proceed without U.S. backing or support. In contrast, A9@Jw]JQQ/f a "no more Occupation" perception among the people, but cautioned that ISF would continue to need U.S. support to ensure that they respected human rights and were not tied to ethnic or religious motivations.

¶18. (U) Turkomen PC members in Kirkuk said that Iraq's political process had not yet resolved key issues regarding the future of the oil-rich city, disputed territories and oil revenue. He stressed there "needs to be action, not just meetings" on these subjects. A Shia member of ISCI agreed with the troop departure timeline, noting that Iraq had to take on more responsibility for its own future, otherwise Iraq's current dependency on the U.S. (like a child with parents) would not end.

COMMENT

¶19. (C) Local media reports gauging reactions to the President's speech track with what our PRTs have heard across the country. A majority of Iraqis appear to understand that the upcoming U.S. troop withdrawal will mark a new period in which more will be expected of Iraqi leaders and citizens alike in order to resolve outstanding issues. Continued support for ISF should help lessen concerns about a return to sectarian violence. Currently unresolved political issues -- most prominently those tied to the Kurdish region and its oil fields -- will test, however, the extent to which Iraq's democratically elected politicians see a common future working together toward shared aims -- or, perhaps, something else. U.S. troop departures should highlight that debate and spur leaders to begin to make more tough decisions and sooner.
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¶16. (U) The head of a main Arab party in Kirkuk said they opposed the "premature" plan. Once the U.S. leaves, a "disaster" will happen. Another party member claimed that when she heard the President's speech, she almost collapsed -- in a prior meeting with the PRT, the same PC member had said that it was "better to have the U.S. in Iraq for 100 years than Iran for one year."

¶17. (U) A PUK member of the Kirkuk PC said that as long as

the U.S. increased its civilian efforts as its military commitment was reduced, the timeline appeared sound and reasonable. He added that many believed the main U.S. objective in Iraq had been achieved (i.e., removing a dictatorship and fostering a democratic government in its place); with sustained, non-military aid to Iraq, the U.S. could prevent any backsliding. A local Kurdish councilwoman stressed the positive aspect of a "no more Occupation" perception among the people, but cautioned that ISF would continue to need U.S. support to ensure that they respected human rights and were not tied to ethnic or religious motivations.

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